

A Sniper's "Mindfulness"

By Matthieu Ricard on April 28, 2009

Is mindfulness wholesome in and of itself?

An inspiring meeting convened by the Mind and Life Institute between the Dalai Lama and a group of distinguished scientists and scholars recently was held in Dharamsala, India.

Rupert Gethin, an eminent scholar of the Theravada and Pali tradition of Buddhism, expressed the opinion that mindfulness, as defined by the Pali scriptures, is wholesome in and of itself.

He gave the example of Philippe Petit, the famous French high wire artist who, in 1974, spent 45 minutes walking back and forth on a cable stretched between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, 380 meters above the ground.

He danced on it, bounced up and down (his feet leaving the wire), and even lay down on the cable - all this with a beatific smile on his face. He was obviously in a state of grace. Witnesses still speak of this astonishing feat with tears in their eyes.

Rupert Gethin felt that this incredible acrobat must have maintained a state of uninterrupted mindfulness that could be considered to be a fundamentally wholesome state, like the kind that leads to achieving enlightenment.

We argued that it all depended on the motivation of the acrobat. Even though he declared that his feat was a display of sheer beauty offered to the world, he could have also been motivated by less lofty purposes. He could have been seeking fame, and we might even conceive of a case where an acrobat would want to cross over on the tightrope to take revenge and kill someone on the other side. R. Gethin thought that if that were the case, the acrobat would not have been able to maintain pure mindfulness for so long and would have fallen down.

A clearer example might be that of a sniper waiting for his victim: he can be one-pointedly concentrated, abiding unwaveringly in the present moment, calm and poised. The sniper is able to maintain his attention over time and bring it back to his target as soon as it wanders. To succeed in his ominous goal, he has to ward off distraction and laxity, the two major obstacles to attention.

Bare attention, as consummate as it might be, is no more than a tool that can certainly be used to achieve enlightenment and is needed for this purpose, but which can also be used to cause immense suffering. Obviously what is entirely missing is the ethical dimension of a mindfulness that deserves the qualification of "wholesome" and can lead to enlightenment.

In addition to directing the attention (*manasikara* in Pali, *manaskara* in Sanskrit, and *yid la byed pa* in Tibetan) to a chosen object and maintaining the attention on this object (respectively *sati*, *smriti*, and *dran pa*), genuine mindfulness must include an understanding of the nature of one's mental state (*sampajanna*, *samprajna* and *shes bzhin*), free from distortions, as well as an

embedded ethical component that enables one to clearly discern whether or not it is beneficial to maintain our present state of mind and behavior.

To these three, one also adds “concern” (Pali, appamadena, Skt. apramada, Tib. bag yod) which is to constantly maintain the ethical dimension of mindfulness and vigilantly guard the mind from falling into unwholesome thoughts that lead to unwholesome actions.

The practice of mindfulness thus needs to be guided by right view and insight (such as the understanding that all phenomena are empty of independent existence), and motivated by the right intention, such as the aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

It is quite true that a meditator resting in pure awareness and perfect understanding of the fundamental nature of mind, unaltered by mental constructions, will be unable to pull the trigger and kill someone. This kind of luminous awareness is a state of wisdom and is the natural state of a mind that is entirely free from ignorance and mental toxins and spontaneously imbued with unconditional altruism and compassion. Such a state is the result of having achieved inner freedom and should not be confused with mere mindfulness and bare attention.